

## **MARS Report - Overview of Action Steps**

### **Initial Report to School Committee**

**March 8, 2017**

The leadership team reviewed the MARS report and are pleased that the MARS report provided many highly positive commendations in its report including:

- “Gateway has done well to maintain the breadth of program currently offered, given the small size of both elementary and secondary student enrollment.”
- “After studying this district for several months, the level of community outreach and communication seems completely adequate and perhaps above what might normally be expected.”
- “The breadth of program offered at Gateway Regional High School is critical to its on-going efficacy and ability to serve the community. In no way should the academic program be further reduced in spite of low enrollments.”
- “One of the more important observations was that teachers reported that the District was conscientious about solving problems and addressing weaknesses.”
- “Overall, Gateway has achieved an impressive level of technology access and infrastructure given its extremely limited staffing and financial resources. The district has leveraged many external supports and funding sources to make this possible.”
- “Gateway’s expenditures for maintenance and support of its school buildings compare quite favorably with other regional school districts in this part of the state. In fact, one could make a case that Gateway is one of the more efficient districts in this comparison.”
- “One issue that has become clear to the MARS Consulting Group is that the Gateway Regional School District is run quite efficiently.”
- “Gateway is staffed by very caring and dedicated educators.”

The leadership team also spent much time focussed on recommendations and sorted them in terms of priority, timelines, resources needed to implement, actions required or already in progress, the potential cost (where known), and if they related to school committee/district goals. The recommendations were also categorized as “Budget”; “Curriculum”; “Organization/Operations”; “Special Education”; “Facilities and Grounds”; and “Transportation”. Roughly half of the recommendations were labeled as high priority and half designated as low or medium priority. Of the recommendations reviewed, 27 were seen as “ongoing” items that had already been identified and being worked on. Many items are already in the process of being completed and several additional items already have resources allocated to them in the FY’18 budget. The majority of recommendations stand on their own but there were a number of areas where similar recommendations were made and could have an impact on sustainability. These are addressed in the remainder of this overview.

There were 15 recommendations that focussed on additional staff stipends, sharing services, hiring additional administrators, increasing administrative time, hiring staff to support special education and looking at increased regionalized services. While the DESE review completed in May, 2015, found that the district had not done any work on increasing regionalization, the MARS report had several more specific suggestions to consider but also noted that,

“As noted in the Regionalization Report, we recognize that virtually all of the towns in a reasonable proximity to the Gateway Regional School District are already part of other

regional districts. Creating a Super Region would be difficult, but not out of the question. The Gateway Superintendent could organize a meeting of area superintendents to discuss this option or perhaps offer to meet with the surrounding districts individually to see if there are common interests in some form of consolidation and/or sharing of resources.”

There was a significant push by the DESE in the recent past regarding regionalization, including funding for some districts. This was a useful process in that it demonstrated the challenges faced in regionalization, even if only with two or three towns.

As seen by prior studies on increasing regionalization, there are often very limited savings, or even additional costs, involved in the change. As an example, items that have been addressed in other studies are the costs of aligning union contracts across the new district, the need to add staff to handle the day to day issues, and the costs of aligning curriculum, technology, evaluations, transportation, operating procedures, closing schools and consolidating schools. If we consider a potential example of combining two existing regional districts, especially considering the size of existing districts in our area, we would also face some additional hurdles - the number of town meetings that would be required, the distances between schools and offices, the issue of determining appropriate representation on an even larger school committee (or, if not fully regionalized, the number of different school committees and therefore budgets, splitting of costs, and the evaluation of a single superintendent by multiple school committees). Even when looking at sharing central office staff , given the need to support ongoing administrative responsibilities and looking at the items MARS noted we may wish to buttress in terms of administrative support (special education, curriculum, and technology), the net result may be an overall cost to the district (see chart below).

Position	Current Average	Super District/Shared Cost
Superintendent	\$170,000	\$90,000
Business Manager	\$100,000	\$50,000
Assistant BM	\$0	\$40,000
Personnel Officer	\$0	\$60,000
Curriculum Director	\$0	\$50,000
Technology Director	\$0	\$50,000
Special Education Director	\$90,000	\$50,000
Accounts Payable/Receivable	\$40,000	\$20,000
Administrative Assistant	\$50,000	\$25,000
Office Manager	\$0	\$40,000
Total	\$450,000	\$475,000

While there may be variations on staffing scenarios and salaries, the net result is that we may pick up some additional services (technology director, personnel manager, curriculum director) but there wouldn't be the savings envisioned by some, certainly not the \$500,000 or more that would make a significant difference in Russell's and Huntington's increased assessments, which would also push the other four towns into even lower historical assessments (recall that four of our six towns will be paying less next year in assessments than they did in FY'09).

The administrative team believes there is a better way to enhance services that would provide the additional services without a significant cost increase, broaden the opportunities for staff members who may be interested in curriculum, technology, school leadership, professional development or a range of other topics, and that would strengthen the professionalism, esprit de corps, and overall school climate in the district. These ideas would also enable us to keep our current staff numbers consistent (allowing for maintaining course offerings based upon staff certifications), empower our staff by providing management opportunities and collaborative time, continue the support of the district with localized administrative staff, and continue to build upon a culture that supports staff remaining with the district, and working individually with our students, that is not often found in larger districts.

While we've been working on how to best empower our staff, we don't currently have all of the answers and recognize that this will take much additional work with our staff and potential agreements with the various staff associations. This will be part of the ongoing work in completing the "Gateway 2025" process that we've been working on for almost two years and that will become part of a revised 'Strategic Plan' for the district as recommended by the MARS report.

There were also several suggestions related to working with other local districts and cooperatives to share/purchase services. We currently use the Collaborative for Educational Services (CES) and the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative (LPVEC) for a range of purchased services as this is both staff and cost effective. We have been researching and talking with the collaboratives in order to determine if membership would be more cost effective or would provide additional services. We have also been working with a number of districts to explore potential staff sharing and in the past have shared specialists with other districts. These opportunities vary from year to year based upon student needs and staff opportunities. We currently have one shared staff possibility and continue to work on finalizing the details of a potential agreement. Past opportunities have not resulted in agreements due to the lack of interest with other districts' school committees or superintendents, but we continue to explore the possibilities.

Numerous recommendations were offered regarding budget development and communication with the communities. There are several options regarding meeting the overall intent of improving budget development and communications. The most obvious one is to reinstate some sort of budget development process that more fully welcomes in town officials, provides more detail at an earlier point in the process for school committee members, and is spread over a greater period of time. Therefore we offer the following two scenarios for school committee consideration:

1. Use an existing school committee meeting date in September, November, January, and March to do a more thorough review of the budget process and specifically invite town officials to these 'finance meetings'. This could be the first hour of a meeting, built into the agenda (potentially in place of presentations), or be the sole purpose of the meeting. We'd have administrators review department budgets and answer questions, provide an overview,

and then closely look at the line item budget. This would eliminate a 'subcommittee', get the whole committee more informed about the budget, address town issues with not being invited to be a part of the budget development process, and not create additional meeting nights.

2. Create a finance subcommittee consisting of a school committee member from each town and invite the towns to appoint a member of the town finance committee or selectboard (therefore we'd have 12 members and no SC quorum). This committee could meet the hour prior to school committee meetings on existing school committee dates in September, November, January, and March, like other school committee subcommittees, and we'd follow the same format as in the first proposal (administrators review department budgets and answer questions, provide an overview, and then closely look at the line item budget). While this doesn't bring the whole committee up to speed, it does create a smaller group to review the budget and budget development process. This could also be held from 6:30 to 7:30 and the regular school committee on those evenings would meet from 7:30 to 9:00 rather than having the subcommittee start at 6 and the school committee at 7.

The school committee would choose a method to enhance the budget process, determine how the agenda would be set up (especially in terms of the first option), and consider whether this would work better if the school committee regularly met at the main complex rather than rotate several meetings between the towns (the complex remains a central location, we have access to the district's WiFi with the Chromebooks we've been providing at meetings, and according to Mrs. Crane's notes, attendance at our traveling meetings is no better than when we meet at the main complex).

We are also open to considering how to research the items that MARS noted would be collaborative efforts between the district and towns, namely:

- Setting a meeting(s) between administration, school committee, and town officials to develop common goals around budgets, capital planning, and enhancing sharing information that would be run by a paid facilitator hired by the towns and the district.
- Assisting the towns with developing bidding processes and specifications for vocational education transportation.
- Assisting the towns with implementing and managing technology.
- Supporting the towns in their efforts to make broadband internet access ubiquitous in all towns.
- Moving forward on reviewing and updating the regional agreement.
- Researching potential ways that district staff, especially in the financial sector, could be shared with the towns.

The leadership team looks forward to further discussions of the MARS report and fully supports their recommendation that we complete the Gateway 2025 visioning process as part of finalizing an updated Strategic Plan.